

The University of Chicago

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE IDEA
OF GOD IN CONTEMPORARY
NEGRO LITERATURE**

**A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN
CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR
OF PHILOSOPHY**

1935

**By
BENJAMIN E. MAYS**

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The Negro literature here considered includes the chief productions of Negroes from the time of Paul L. Dunbar up to the present--novels, poetry, and the writings of social scientists. This will be labeled "Classical" Negro Literature. The study will also include literature of the Negro masses--that is, Sunday School literature, prayers, sermons, and Negro spirituals.

The word "Contemporary" applies to the period from Dunbar to the present, and the period is divided into two epochs. The first epoch embraces the period from 1892 to 1914, beginning with the year in which Dunbar was rising to fame. It is justifiable to begin with Dunbar because Negro race-consciousness begins to flower forth quite significantly from his time on. It is equally true that Dunbar was the first great interpreter of Negro life. In this interpretation, however, his poetry rises beyond race, and his philosophy is applicable to the entire human family, as all artistic work must be. Dunbar is also acclaimed by many as the first great Negro poet.

The first period begins with Dunbar in the second place because it includes the years during which Booker T. Washington did his most effective work, and without doubt a new era for the Negro began with Washington. He was easily the most noted Negro American during this period, and was one of the most distinguished American citizens of his day. This first period includes his writings.

Significance of the Period from 1914 to 1935

The second epoch begins with 1914 and marks the beginning of a new emancipation for the Negro. It is probably true that the greatest social, economic, and religious upheaval of the Negro since his emancipation occurred during the migratory period (1914-1925) when Negroes moved from South to North and from rural to urban areas. As foreigners residing in America returned to Europe

to participate in the World War, and as the War put a stop to the great influx of Europeans to America, the Negro was sought to work in the industries of the North.

Almost simultaneously in 1915 and 1916 there was a complete breakdown of the one-crop-cotton system of the South, caused principally by boll-weevil ravages, and this was further aggravated by unusual floods in the main cotton states during 1915.

These two events, boll-weevils and the flood, made life on the farm very unstable and precarious for the Negro. The traditional custom of mortgaging the crop before it was produced suddenly broke down. The landlords dismissed Negro tenants by the hundreds and thousands, and commissaries by which thousands of Negroes lived were forced to close. Banks and merchants ceased to extend credit, since cotton could no longer be relied upon for security. In this situation Northern industries, since the number of foreign immigrants had greatly decreased owing to the War, seized the opportunity to bid for Negro labor, offering attractive wages.¹ Many Negroes looked upon these circumstances as blessings in disguise and considered 1914 the dawn of a new economic era for the race.

Beginning with 1914, it was not only a significant era but it opened up to the Negro larger opportunities in civic, social, and political areas. The movement of Negroes to urban centers, though largely economic in character, was accelerated by the deficiency of the rural school system in the South; the denial of the ballot to Negroes in virtually the whole of the South; the brutal and inhuman treatment of Negroes in the courts; the inferior accommodation on railroads and busses; lynching, and the fear of the mob.²

It is further justifiable to use the time span from 1892 to 1935 as the period of the study because during this time definite social and economic trends in Negro life developed, though mainly in the post-War period. These trends furnish an excellent background against which the ideas of God are traced and developed.

¹Emmett J. Scott, Negro Migration during World War (New York: Oxford University Press, American Branch), pp. 14 ff.

²The Negro in Chicago (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1922), chap. 111.

1. During the first period of the study Booker Washington and his philosophy dominated almost the whole of Negro life and influenced greatly the thinking of white America with respect to the Negro. He emphasized industrial education for the masses of Negroes and believed that it was folly for the Negro to try to force the dominant group to accept him socially and politically. He believed that as the Negro made himself proficient and indispensable in the industrial and mechanical phases of life, he would eventually win his way in the other areas of life. Rights and privileges, he believed, are to be achieved. The Negro was advised to cast down his bucket where he was and prove to white America that he was an asset and not a liability. The desire for economic security was uppermost in Washington's mind. Though a few voices like DuBois and Monroe Trotter opposed Washington in his program, their voices were feeble in comparison with the impression that Washington had made on American life. His ideas are perpetuated in Tuskegee Institute.

2. Opposition to Washington's ideas became organized in 1909, the year the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People came into existence. In 1910 the Crisis was born--the official organ of the N.A.A.C.P. Though organized in the first period of the study, the greatest work of the Association and of the Crisis was done during the War and in the post-War era. The N.A.A.C.P. was and is primarily civic and political in character. It would be safe to say that the N.A.A.C.P. came into existence for the express purpose of making actual those rights and privileges theoretically guaranteed to the Negro in the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the Constitution of the United States. The N.A.A.C.P. wants not only economic security, but civic, political, and social security; also recognition, social response, and the opportunity of new experiences in areas closed to the Negro.

3. The third social and economic trend of our period is represented in the National Urban League, which was organized in 1910. It was incorporated as the National League on Urban Conditions among Negroes in 1913--one year before the beginning of the second epoch of our investigation. The Urban League is chiefly concerned with the Negro's advancement in industry--his opportunity to get work on the basis of efficiency and as far as possible without discrimination; his opportunity to improve and to be promoted on the job; and to promote the idea of equal pay for the same calibre of work done. The League is also concerned with the making of

scientific investigations to set forth the facts concerning the Negro as a worker and to stipulate his industrial and economic needs. It seeks to improve urban conditions among Negroes in matters of health, recreation, delinquency, and crime. It also endeavors to get the doors of organized labor opened to the Negro. Like Booker Washington, the National Urban League expresses the Negro's desire to be economically secure. The next trend also reveals the desire to be economically protected.

4. There is emerging now a new emphasis with respect to the economic status of the Negro--an emphasis that differs widely from that of the National Urban League, but is related to it in its economic emphasis. It might be stated as the emphasis of the Negro Business League and other leaders who reflect the view of the Negro Business League. Instead of seeking to become integrated with American business generally, this group argues that from necessity the Negro must build up a separate and distinct group economy of his own or he will be completely crushed or forever exploited.

5. The fifth trend is set forth by the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. This Association was organized in Chicago by Carter G. Woodson, September 9, 1915, one year after the beginning of the second epoch of our period. In brief, the Association aims to create in the Negro group esteem and group self-respect. It seeks to do this primarily by digging up the history and past accomplishments of Negroes and publishing these in books, articles, and in the Journal of Negro History, the official organ of the Association. It seeks further to develop group esteem and group and individual self-respect by urging Negroes to study their history and by urging the teaching of Negro history in Negro schools. It is the belief of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History that the Negro will never be an upstanding, respectable people so long as Negroes despise their history and look upon themselves with eyes of inferiority. This desire for status is to be achieved primarily by getting the Negro to accept and appreciate himself.

6. The last significant trend of the period is embodied in the ideas of Communism. This is wholly a post-War trend and is built upon the belief that the hope of the Negro lies in the Communist Party, where the barriers of race are almost completely abolished--a philosophy built upon the conviction that the present

economic order must be completely uprooted and the Communism of Russia instituted in its stead.

It is against the social, economic, and educational background portrayed in the previous pages that we endeavor to construct the thesis: The development of the idea of God in contemporary Negro literature finds expression in three main areas.

The Main Contentions

The main emphases of the thesis are placed upon the development of the idea of God in its relation to certain trends revealed in contemporary Negro literature. The assertion is made and defended that:

1. In most of the "mass" literature and in an appreciable amount of the "classical" Negro literature, ideas of God adhere strictly to traditional compensatory patterns. They are traditional in the sense that the ideas of God are mainly those of orthodox Christianity as set forth in the Bible, with primary emphasis upon the magical, spectacular, partial, revengeful, and personal nature of God as revealed in the Old Testament; and, those naïve ideas that are being rapidly discarded in an age of science. The ideas are compensatory when used or developed to support a shallow pragmatism. That is, a belief or idea may be accredited as true if it satisfies our desire; "if it uplifts or consoles"; or if it makes us "happier to believe it" even though the belief or idea does not fit observed facts. A dependent mother who believes in a God who answers prayers and who prays to Him twice daily asking Him to bless her sons, preserve their lives, and cause them to prosper (thinking her task is done when she does this) is illustrative of an idea of God that supports such pragmatism. The idea influences her behavior--it leads her to pray; it helps her to feel better; it saves her from much worry; it enables her to sleep at night. This person's behavior is different from that of a person who does not believe in this sort of praying. It has value for the mother, but it is an idea of God used to perpetuate compensatory thinking. Furthermore, ideas of God that are used to support an other-worldly view are ideas that adhere to traditional compensatory patterns; also those ideas that encourage one to believe that "God's in His heaven; all's right with the world," and those ideas that tend to produce negative goodness in the individual based on a fear of the wrath of God here or in the next world.

2. There is a constructive development of the idea of God to support a growing consciousness of social adjustment needed which may be differentiated as follows:

- a. Social adjustment that is universal in scope but inclusive of the needs of the Negro.
- b. Social adjustment that is confined primarily to the social and economic needs of the Negro as typified in Washington and others.
- c. A psychological adjustment in which the idea of God is interpreted to support the growing conviction that the Negro is not an inferior people and for that reason is entitled to the social, economic, and political privileges exercised by other groups.

3. There is a growing tendency or threat on the part of the younger post-War writers to abandon the conception of God "as a useful instrument" in social rehabilitation as evidenced by the following facts:

- a. There is a tendency to doubt God so far as His being of value to the Negro in his effort to rise.
- b. God is described as having outlived His usefulness.
- c. There is a denial of the existence of God.

The development of the idea of God in relation to these trends constitutes the heart of the thesis.

The ideas of God that are most commonly taught and exposed to the mass of Negroes, ideas reflected in sermons--one hundred stenographically reported sermons and God's Trombones--particularly the other-worldly type; ideas of God that are found in practically all of the stenographically reported prayers; in some of the hymns frequently sung; ideas of God set forth in the Spirituals; and those ideas revealed in the Church School literature for adults and young people of one denomination are ideas of God that adhere strictly to traditional, compensatory patterns. Though recognizing notable exceptions, they are compensatory and traditional in character because they are not developed nor are they interpreted in terms of social rehabilitation; they are ideas of God that are conducive to developing in the Negro a complacent, laissez-faire attitude toward life. A brief summary of ideas that adhere to compensatory traditional patterns follows in the next paragraph.

God fights the battles of His chosen people and He will bring them out victors in every crisis. Not only is God to fight

our battles but He is to prepare a place for us in heaven. For example:

Fight our battle for us and lead us to the rock of salvation.

Oh, Lord, here we are down here in a world of trouble; down here in a world of sorrow. . . . Oh, Lord, have mercy right now this day our Heavenly Father and in the end, give me a lasting resting place in that city where we can praise Thy name forever.

Whatever happens is permitted by God and there is nothing we can do about it. God will protect you from danger (physical), sickness, and disease if your ways are pleasing to Him. If your ways are pleasing to God, He will solve your problems. For example:

If a man's ways please God, he can awake at the hour of midnight with a smile on his face and solve the problems and he will defeat those who try to retard his progress. He simply kneels down and tells God about his problems and God will solve them.

A mother prayed to God and asked Him to save her four sons from being killed in France. God answered her prayers; notwithstanding the fact that millions were killed in the War, her four sons were saved. "God is in His heaven; all is right with the world." God is a rock in a weary land and a shelter in a mighty storm. God knows all our needs and He will provide them. All things work together for good for those who love the Lord. God takes care of His own during the depression.

This brief summary of the ideas of God is fairly representative of the ideas of God that are commonly taught to the mass of Negroes in sermons of the other-worldly type, in the Spirituals, in prayers, in hymns and in Church School literature for pupils between the ages of six and sixteen. They are ideas of God that adhere closely to traditional, compensatory patterns.

These ideas are dominant in the fifty-four other-worldly sermons revealed in an analysis of one hundred stenographically recorded sermons and in fully twenty-one of the other forty-six which are not so characteristically other-worldly. That this is true of the Spirituals is too obvious for demonstration. Of fifty-one stenographically reported prayers, thirty-five were dominantly other-worldly. It is clear from the prayers that many Negroes consider this world a land of sorrow and trouble and not of joy. Life is looked upon as a temporary affair; their real home is beyond Jordan. There are frequent references to the fact that they are packing up to leave. As indicated previously,

journeying through this world is a weary journey and they need God to guide them through. This world is also a world of trouble and it is friendless. The hymns are not so dominantly other-worldly. Out of eighty-eight different hymns that were sung over a period of three months in several of the largest and most "sophisticated" Negro churches in Atlanta, only thirty, or 31.8 per cent, were other-worldly. As stated in the preceding paragraph, other ideas of God (scattered throughout the literature under discussion) though not other-worldly, are traditional and compensatory. Particularly is this true of the Church School literature, which covers the literature of all grades including a time span of fifteen months for the Baptists, nine months for the African Methodist, and a period of three months for the Colored Methodist. Three quotations will illustrate clearly the point advanced here. It is clear as one reads that two ideas of God stand out pre-eminently: God fights your battles for you, and He saves you from death. The sermon is expressive of the desire for security and also the desire for new experiences. The sermon in part follows:

Oh, Glory! the waves rolled back on both sides and the children of Israel walked across and as they journeyed they sang, 'Glory to His Name.' God said, 'Go on down, Pharaoh cannot pass.' I don't care where you are my God will find you sure enough. I don't know where I will be next year but I know I will be standing in line marching somewhere. He will fight your battle for you. You should serve the same God that brought the children of Israel out of bondage, for He will take care of you. The same God that drowned Pharaoh is the same God today. After a while, bye and bye, when the war is over, the Church will be there. I will be there. . . . I imagine when the war is over that Gabriel will step out with one foot planted on the land and the other planted on the sea and time will be no more. I want to know what the trumpet of God will say. . . .

As they go on their march, the people will ask what place is this? The children of God will cry 'What place is this?' But they will say, 'Heaven is farther still, farther still to go,' and the church will march on. The people will cry again, 'What place is this?' But the answer comes, 'Heaven is farther still.' Still another time, 'Angel of God, what place is this?' But the march still goes on. Then those in heaven will look down and see that it is the church people who are God's people that are on board and they will ask, 'Who are those coming up from the lower world?' Jesus will say, 'These are they who carried their burdens in the heat of the day.'³

³Mays and Nicholson, The Negro's Church (New York: Institute of Social and Religious Research, 1933), p. 81.

The traditional compensatory character of the ideas of God here portrayed is clearly marked and is as dominant as the ideas set forth in the Spirituals and God's Trombones. Security, new experiences, and recognition are all to be experienced outside the process of history.

God Fights Your Battles and Solves Your Problems

If you know how to stay in touch with God, you can win any battle. David stayed in touch with God and he won his battle. . . . I fear prayer has no charm for us. Mothers and fathers haven't got time to pray and yet they expect God to help them. Go back to the knee way. The hard times that are coming, the misunderstanding, they come because of a lack of prayer. Go back to prayer and God will fight your battle.

If a man's ways please God, he can awake at the hour of midnight with a smile on his face and solve the problems, and he will defeat those who try to retard his progress. He simply kneels down and tells God about his problems and God will solve them.⁴

The World Is Not My Home

I've come from out the darkness,
Direct from God's own hand;
Upon this little island,
My foot first touches land.
I know not whence I came here,
I know not where I go;
I know I'm on a journey,
And this is all I know.

This world is not the country
Where I must take my stand;
I seek another city,
In some far distant land;
I'm pausing here a moment
To catch the air and light;
Just let me get my bearings
And I'll resume my flight.⁵

Although the literature under discussion contains ideas of God as described above, predominantly so, it must be pointed out that there are ideas of God in this literature that are not compensatory, though in essence traditional. They are ideas of God that are developed and interpreted along social lines. The following ideas in the mass literature tend to move along the lines of personal and social adjustment that is needed here in

⁴Ibid., pp. 87, 88.

⁵John Wesley Holloway, From The Desert (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1919), p. 142.

this world.

There is found an idea of God which makes one's relationship to God inseparable from his relationship to his fellows--an idea of God which challenges one to become reconciled with his fellow men; to live a life that is in harmony with God and man; to develop an attitude of appreciation and sympathy for all human beings. There is also expressed an idea of God which makes God a transforming agency. God's spirit works wonders upon the individual. "Family life makes the man a loving father, it makes him a man the people will trust, a man the bank will trust--a man who will not be dishonest and work the life out of people and steal their blood and bread. This is what God's Holy Spirit will do." The idea is implicit in the quotation that when God gets into a man he will want economic security for others and not for himself alone and that he will work to that end. Another idea is, that we are indebted to God for everything, and the way to pay God is to use our talents to benefit and improve humanity. Again there is given an idea of God which shows that God liberates human personality for the sole purpose of transforming the social order so that the abundant life might accrue to all. The idea is expressed that God requires us to become worthy factors in bringing about world peace. Finally the idea is clearly set forth that man belongs to God, and organically one is a part of God and man. "There is a divine value in human life and every recipient is under obligation to God to respect that value, for all human life is precious unto Him." The ideas that are developed in terms of social reconstruction are found primarily in the twenty-five this-worldly sermons and in the quarterlies of young people and adults. This in brief concludes the summary of the ideas of God as found in the literature of the Negro masses.

Classical Negro literature is composed of the writings of the poets, novelists, and social scientists--productions that have come out since the time of Paul Lawrence Dunbar. As will be seen later, all three developments with respect to the idea of God are to be found in this section.

There is a striking difference between the ideas of God found and developed in classical Negro literature and those ideas of God of the Negro masses. Four distinctions might be mentioned:

1. The ideas of God in this literature, more than is the case in the mass literature, are ideas of God that are devel-

oped to substantiate the growing conviction of Negro writers that radical changes are needed in social and economic areas.

2. The classical Negro literature is more definitely this-worldly in its emphases. The literature which reflects the ideas of God of the masses was found to be more other-worldly in its emphases.

3. Although there is found the same desire for security and recognition in both types of literature, in the classical literature it is a desire for security based on a firm economic foundation and has group significance; whereas the mass literature reveals more a desire to be protected from danger, sickness, disease, death, hell, and enemies. It is the desire for personal security based primarily on the fear of men or on the fear that comes to one who is afraid of life generally because of experiences that make life a precarious and hazardous undertaking. Similarly the desire for recognition in the classical literature is not so much a personal thing but is an effort to have the group recognized. In the other literature, this desire is highly personal.

4. In the mass literature there is found without exception a deep abiding faith in God; while in the classical literature there is found a strain of doubt, revolt, frustration, cynicism, agnosticism, and atheism. These points of difference will become clearer in the analysis which follows.

A brief summary of the most significant ideas of God in classical Negro literature that are used to support the need of psychological and social readjustment are given below.

God created all races from one blood; God is love; God is beauty; God and humanity are one; God has set no geographical boundaries nor racial limitations; there is no divine right of race; the rights of humanity are divine and they cannot be divested by reason of race; we are all God's creatures; God created the Negro in His own image; God has made no superior races; He has made no inferior races; the Negro is God's most perfect handiwork; the human family is united in God; the Negro is on a special errand for God; every soul comes into the world with love for man and love for God; God spins every person from Himself; God is on the side of right, actively engaged in the struggle but in co-operation with man; God has put the Negro and the white man here in America to prove to the world that two races varying in culture

and in color can live together, each contributing to the welfare of the other; God, if you let Him, erases from your heart race hatred and prejudice; God gives one strength and courage to battle and contend for the right; peace and good-will will come among races when they come to recognize their unity in God; and, finally, God desires that every individual be given the right to grow to perfection without the imposition of artificial barriers from without. These ideas of God, we argued, are clearly ideas of God that support the growing consciousness that social change should be perfected along the lines of racial and social justice. The quotations are given to show the three variations noted under the second contention. The first quotation illustrates how the idea of God is developed to show the need of social reconstruction on a universal side.

God Is Love

In the section on "The Damnation of Women," in which the author pleads for the liberation of all women, he identifies God with love. He writes: "Civilization must show two things: the glory and beauty of creating life and the need and duty of power and intelligence. This and this only will make the perfect marriage of love and work."

God is Love
Love is God;
There is no God but Love
And work is His prophet!

This verse is set in his argument for economic independence for women and his insistence that women should have a life work. Love demands that women be emancipated. In other sections, the kind of world God demands, is set forth.

The vast and wonderful knowledge of this marvelous universe is locked in the bosoms of its individual souls. To tap this mighty reservoir of experience, knowledge, beauty, love, and deed, we must appeal not to the few, not to some souls, but to all. The narrower the appeal, the poorer the culture; and wider the appeal the more magnificent are the possibilities. Infinite is human nature. We make it finite by choking back the mass of men, by attempting to speak for others, to interpret and act for them, and we end by acting for ourselves and using the world as our private property. If this were all, it were crime enough--but it is not all; by our ignorance we make the creation of the greater world impossible; we beat back a world built of the playing of dogs and laughter of children, the song of Black Folk and worship of yellow, the love of women and strength of men, and try to

express by a group of doddering ancients the will of the world.⁶

Following further what is implied in this concept "Love," this statement is significant: "However desperate the temptation, no modern nation can shut the gates of opportunity in the face of its women, its peasants, its laborers, or its socially damned."⁷

The God-ideas expressed and implied in the quotations above challenge one to work to create a life of love and beauty for all peoples--women, peasants, laborers, and the socially damned. God opposes restrictions and barriers that impede the infinite development of human nature. The author takes the traditional idea that God is love and develops it to show the kind of world we ought to have. In the interpretation of the idea, he gives it universal application and packs into it a meaning that is dynamic enough to revolutionize the social order--to create a new world.

God Punishes

From the results of the war with Spain, let us learn this, that God has been teaching the Spanish nation a terrible lesson. . . . God has been teaching Spain that for every one of her subjects that she has left in ignorance, poverty and crime the price must be paid; and, if it has not been paid with the very heart of the nation, it must be paid with the proudest and bluest blood of her sons and with treasure that is beyond computation. From this spectacle I pray God that America will learn a lesson in respect to the ten million Negroes in this country.⁸

Clearly Washington is pleading for white America to take a determined stand to abolish ignorance, poverty, and crime that exist among the Negroes in this country. He takes one of the most traditional of the God-ideas and uses it to chasten the white man and to whip him into line. Pointing to Spain as an object lesson, the idea of God is used to support Washington's belief that the status of ten million Negroes should be improved. It is one of the clearest cases thus far presented to show how a traditional idea of God is interpreted to support a growing consciousness of

⁶W. E. B. DuBois, Dark Water (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Howe, 1920), pp. 140-41.

⁷Ibid., p. 154.

⁸B. T. Washington, Future of the American Negro (Boston: Small, Maynard and Company, 1899), p. 177.

social adjustment needed. In reinterpreting the idea "that God punishes," in order to swing it in line with social change which Washington wanted to see perfected, does not mean that Washington was insincere. It was perhaps this belief in God that stimulated him to urge and warn the dominant group in America to change its attitude and doings with respect to the Negro. The idea of God is developed along social lines that adhere strictly to the needs of the race. It is to be noted that the relief which Washington desires is sought not in heaven but here.

God Has Set No Geographical Boundaries nor
Racial Limitations

The Greek mind reached the loftiest pinnacle of thought and genius as long as the environment favored the development of this peculiar form of culture, but the lapse of two thousand years does not indicate that this race possesses today the slightest trace of that intellectual subtlety which gave rise to "the glory that was Greece." God has made of one blood and of one mind and of one spirit, all nations that dwell on the face of the earth, and has set as the bounds of their habitation no geographical lines nor racial limitations, but the natural boundaries of land and sea which fix the confines of human habitability. Race and color are physical and geographical attributes, and do not permanently determine mind and spirit. All races in the long run will respond to the same stimulus in the same way.

In the following quotation Miller expresses the same idea in another way:

There Is No Divine Right of Race

But along with the divine right of kings must go every other semblance of the divine right, including divine right of race. There is no more reason to suppose that God has chosen the white race to exercise lordship over the darker races of men than that He has chosen Germans to lord it over the other European nations. There exists in the minds of many the deep-seated opinion that the white race has some God-ordained mission to which the weaker breeds must bow in humble submission. Rudyard Kipling's 'White Man's Burden' is but the modern refrain of the exploded conceit that God has given His chosen race the heathen for their possession to be broken to pieces with a rod of iron. The divine right of kings is a more acceptable doctrine than the divine right of race.¹⁰

⁹ Kelly Miller, The Everlasting Stain (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1924), pp. 35, 36.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 61, 62.

It should be repeated here that all ideas of God in classical Negro literature are not developed in terms of the need of social change. Many of them are highly other-worldly and lead to complacency as much as any of the ideas in the mass literature. To summarize these ideas would be unnecessary repetition.

The third and final trend in the development of the ideas of God in this thesis shows that there is a tendency on the part of recent Negro writers to consider the idea of God as useless in any effort to reconstruct the world socially. Many of these ideas are not flat denials of the existence of God but they show doubt, frustration, and cynicism, which make the idea of God of little value in social crises. In every case, in this third emphasis, the traditional ideas of God as exemplified among the Negro masses and the white man's conceptions of God are abandoned as useless in the social struggle. The ideas run the gamut all the way from mere protest against traditional ideas and abandonment of the same to complete denial of the existence of God. The following quotations are illustrative of humanism and atheism.

Doubting Purpose and a Personal God

My glance forward reaches no farther than this world. I admit that through my adult life I have lacked religiosity. But I make no boast of it; understanding, as I do, how essential religion is to many, many people. For that reason, I have little patience with the zealot who is forever trying to prove to others that they do not need religion; that they would be better off without it. Such a one is no less a zealot than the religionist who contends that all who 'do not believe' will be consigned to eternal hell fires. It is simply that I have not felt the need of religion in the commonplace sense of the term. I have derived spiritual values in life from other sources than worship and prayer. I think that the teachings of Jesus Christ embody the loftiest ethical and spiritual concepts the human mind has yet borne. I do not know if there is a personal God; I do not see how I can know; and I do not see how my knowing can matter. What does matter, I believe, is how I deal with myself and how I deal with my fellows. I feel that I can practice a conduct toward myself and toward my fellows that will constitute a basis for an adequate religion, a religion that may comprehend spirituality and beauty and serene happiness.

As far as I am able to peer into the inscrutable, I do not see that there is any evidence to refute those scientists and philosophers who hold that the universe is purposeless; that man, instead of being the special care of a Divine Providence, is a dependent upon fortuity and his own wits for survival in the midst of blind and insensate forces. But to stop there is to stop short of the vital truth. For mankind and for the individual this state, what though it be accidental and

ephemeral, is charged with meaning. Man's sufferings, his joys, his aspirations, his defeats are just as real and of as great moment to him as they would be if they were part of a mighty and definite cosmic plan.

The human mind racks itself over the never-to-be-known answer to the great riddle, and all that is clearly revealed is the fate that man must continue to hope and struggle on; that each day, if he would not be lost, he must with renewed courage take a fresh hold on life and face with fortitude the turns of circumstances. To do this, he needs to be able to touch God; let the idea of God mean to him whatever it may.¹¹

Whatever the nature of the God Mr. Johnson believes in, it is clear that this God does not operate in some future place called heaven and his God does not consign one to hell. By implication these are denied. With respect to the idea that God is personal, Mr. Johnson is an agnostic with the implication that there may be a God of some sort. His inclination to accept the idea of a purposeless universe and the view that man is not under the special care of a Divine Providence and the further view that man is dependent upon chance and his own ability for survival implies the idea that God does not exist. The author's conviction that "man's sufferings, his joys, his aspirations, his defeats" are not parts of any definite cosmic plan, and his strong implication that man's state here is accidental and ephemeral also imply the non-existence of God. The last paragraph, however, insists that man needs a God if he is to possess sufficient faith to enable him to face life with fortitude. The logic of this paragraph might easily lead one to conclude that there is a plurality of gods and that whatever it is that enables one "to continue to hope and struggle on" is God. In case this is true, there would be as many gods as there are things that stimulate man to live courageously in a world of blind chance. Either this or Mr. Johnson means to say that for the brave and strong of heart, there is no need of a belief in God; but for the weak and frail, the "so-called" masses, the belief in God is a necessity; otherwise, life for them would have no meaning. Here is a clear case where the idea of God as a useful instrument in the area of social reconstruction is clearly abandoned. This is certainly true for Mr. Johnson, although the idea may have value for the masses.

The next writer makes a definite confession of atheism.

¹¹James Weldon Johnson, Along This Way (New York: The Viking Press, 1933), pp. 431, 414.

Good-bye Christ

Listen Christ,
 You did all right in your day I reckon
 But that days gone now.
 They ghosted you up a swell story, too,
 Called it Bible--
 But it's dead now.
 The popes and the preachers've
 Made too much money from it
 They've sold you to too many
 Kings, generals, robbers, and killers--
 Even to the Tzar and the Cossacks
 Even to Rockefeller's church,
 Even to the Saturday Evening Post.
 You ain't no good no more.
 They've pawned you
 Till you've done wore out
 Good-bye.

Christ Jesus Lord God Jehovah,
 Beat it on away from here now.
 Make way for a new guy with no religion at all.
 A real guy named
 Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin,
 Worker ME--
 I said, ME
 Go ahead on now.
 You're getting in the way of things Lord
 And please take Saint Gandhi with you
 when you go
 And Saint Aimee McPherson,
 And big black Saint Becton
 Of the Consecrated Dime
 And step on the gas, Christ
 Don't be so slow about moving;
 Move.
 The world is mine from now on--
 And nobody's gonna sell me
 To a king or a general
 Or a millionaire¹²
 Go ahead on now.

Langston Hughes is easily the most Communistic of the writers used in this study. According to his view Christ and perhaps God have all outlived their usefulness. The world must be left for reconstruction in the hands of Communists. Christ is not only no good in perrecting social change but He is a decided handicap. He gets in the way of things. Here again we have total abandonment of the idea of God as being a constructive

¹²This poem appeared in the November-December issue of the *Negro Worker*, 1932, a 36-page bimonthly magazine published by the Reds in Hamburg, Germany.

force in building a better world.

It is not surprising to find frustration, doubt, cynicism, and denial of God's existence in the writings of Negroes during this post-war period. In the case of the Negro this temper of doubt is peculiar to the group in many respects, but it has its setting in the larger area of disillusionment which followed after the War and which was and is characteristic of the world at large. Horton has well described the latter situation--before and after the War. He says:

In a sense, it was not the War itself which did most to shake the foundations of our ways of thinking; it was its aftermath of disillusionment.

The decade which led up to and included the War was a period of intense social idealism and social optimism. In public life, it was the period of the rapid rise of Progressivism in both of the major political parties; when Theodore Roosevelt took his stand at Armageddon to do battle for the Lord, and Woodrow Wilson stirred the blood of youth with his attacks upon 'dollar diplomacy' and his enlightened plea for 'the new freedom.' In religious circles, it was the period of the immense popularity of the Social Gospel; when 'Service' and 'Self-Sacrifice' were the watchwords of the day, and the liberal coming of the Kingdom of God on earth seemed only a matter of a perfectly measurable and practicable amount of time and co-operative effort.

Now the amazing thing is, not that some people lost their optimism when the War began, but that the great mass of people held on to it tenaciously, with certain inevitable modifications, to the very end of the War--only to abandon it in disgust not long after the Armistice. The tide of social idealism and social millennialism did not abate during the War; it rose to heroic and almost incredible heights. The War was to 'make the world safe for democracy'; it was to 'end war' forever; in the 'new age' after the War, all human institutions were to be reconstructed on a basis of ideal justice; through the awful travail and sacrifice of the great conflict, the coming of the Kingdom of God was to be hastened, even as by the sacrifice of the Son of Man on Calvary.

We trusted our political leaders, when they told us of the villainy of our enemies, and the unimpeachable purity of the aims by which we and our allies were inspired; and, rightly or not, the impression is now abroad that they betrayed us. We trusted our religious leaders, when they proclaimed their apocalyptic visions of a new heaven and a new earth, whose coming was contingent upon the military victory of the Allied Powers; and, at any rate since the collapse of the Inter-Church World Movement, we are pretty convinced that they betrayed us. We trusted to God, somehow, to balance the stupendous evils of the War by an equal weight of good, that would immediately accrue to us in the post-War period; and if faith in God is declining today, it is because many feel that faith, too, has betrayed them.¹³

¹³Walter Marshall Horton, Theism and the Modern Mood (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1930), pp. 1ff.

This extended quotation from Horton is necessary because it describes adequately the larger background that gave rise to this protest and cynicism of Negro writers since the War, particularly the younger Negro writers. It is necessary now to sharpen the issue still further by special reference to the disillusionment of the Negro group.

Whatever one may think to the contrary, there can be no denying the fact that the Negro in the World War made a twofold fight for freedom--"To make the world safe for democracy" and to make America safe for the Negro. The Negro was told by Negro and white leaders that after the War things were going to be better for him. He was made to believe that lynching would cease, that gross injustices in the distribution of public funds would be eliminated, that crippling social and economic proscriptions would be rapidly abolished, and that brotherhood would soon become a reality. The Negro soon discovered, however, that these preachments of the imagination had no basis in fact. Almost before the Armistice was signed, movements were on foot to work out plans whereby the Negro might be kept in "his place." He was advised to return to America and settle down as before--not to expect anything different from what he had experienced before the War. Lynching did not cease; in some instances it increased; race riots multiplied; conflicts in labor continued; social proscriptions remained as before; discriminations in the distribution of public funds seemed to increase; and even the Church of God took no courageous stand to right these wrongs.

The disillusionment experienced by the Negro as a result of the World War is ably expressed by Mordecai W. Johnson, in a Commencement address at Harvard University in 1922.

At the close of the War, however, the Negro's hopes were suddenly dashed to the ground. Southern newspapers began at once to tell the Negro soldiers that the War was over and the sooner they forgot it the better. 'Pull off your uniform,' they said, 'find the place you had before the War and stay in it.' 'Act like a Negro should act,' said one newspaper; 'work like a Negro should work, talk like a Negro should talk, study like a Negro should study. Dismiss all ideas of independence or of being lifted up to the plane of the white man. Understand the necessity of keeping a Negro's place.' In connection with such admonitions there came the great collective attacks on Negro life and property in Washington, Chicago, Omaha, Elaine, and Tulsa. There came also the increasing boldness of lynchers, who advertised their purpose in advance and had their photographs taken around the bodies of their victims. There came vain appeals by the colored people to the President

of the United States and to the Houses of Congress. And finally there came the reorganization and rapid growth of the Ku Klux Klan.¹⁴

It is not surprising then that we get protest against other-worldly religion in Negro churches, protest against the "white man's God," repudiation of the simple faith of former days, expressions of doubt, cynicism, and a flat denial of God's existence. The marvel is that despite these facts we find the major Negro writers maintaining some kind of faith in God.

Doubt, frustration, and denial of God's existence arise from the social crisis. God must not be interested in helping the group to achieve the needs necessary for existence. Either God does not exist or He is indifferent to the needs of the group. They arise at the point where physical security is denied; economic privileges cut off; the free exercise of the ballot prohibited; segregation in every area sustained by custom and law; and the free development of spiritual powers almost completely stifled.

The repudiation or negation of God may influence the behavior of Negroes in many ways. It may lead many of them into the humanistic camp of the Haydon-Otto variety. Negroes would then seek to perfect social change by combining religious idealism and the technique of modern science without relying on God or supernatural aid. The negation of the idea of God may also drive Negroes into the communistic camp, whereby more militant or violent means would be used to achieve political and economic status. The negation of the idea of God might lead weaker souls into the realm of despair leading to suicide; or it might lead to a happy-go-lucky state--enjoy life and get what pleasure you can out of it. The same holds true with those ideas of God involving frustration and doubt.

It is most significant to note that the development of the idea of God is closely related to the social and economic trends that were taking form during the period of our study. The use of the idea of God to help the Negro make the psychological adjustments referred to above is being developed in the same period in which the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History is emphasizing the fact that Negroes should be proud of themselves and their history. The interpretation of the idea of God along militant lines

¹⁴Carter G. Woodson, Negro Orators and Their Orations (Washington: Associated Publishers, 1925), p. 660.

of social justice go hand in hand with the militant emphases of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and those of the National Urban League. Atheism and Humanism develop when Communistic doctrines are being widely diffused among Negroes resulting from the disillusionment that followed the World War. During the time when the social philosophy of Booker T. Washington was dominant, with the emphasis on patience and Washington's expression of firm faith in God, we find that the ideas of God are less militantly interpreted and there is no expression of doubt as to God's help and existence.

In addition to the summary of the way the ideas of God have developed in contemporary Negro literature, it is necessary to record the following outstanding revelations:

1. It is most interesting to note that there is more other-worldliness in Negro literature during the War and immediately following the War than there is in the literature of the first period, from Dunbar to 1914. This does not mean, however, that the ideas of God in the second period (1914-1935) are more compensatory. The reverse is probably true, though in the period from Dunbar to 1914 many ideas of God are developed along social lines.

2. It is equally significant to note that we strike all the trends in the development of the idea of God in the post-War period; whereas only two are found in the pre-War period. Prior to 1914 God is neither doubted nor is His existence denied. Doubt, frustration, and denial are definitely post-War developments.

3. We get, therefore, three widely opposing views in the post-War era--all three, however, developing logically out of the social crisis. As has been stated, there is a wave of other-worldliness during and immediately following the War. After 1920, one finds no other-worldliness, but there is a heavy strain of denial, frustration, cynicism, doubt, and bewilderment. As strange as this may seem, it is not surprising. The development of apocalyptic literature in times of distress, and the desire to escape the hardships of this life by taking a flight to the other world are facts well known to students of history. Other-worldliness arose in Jewish history at a time when Israel had been subjected for generations to domination by one or another of the imperial powers. It is natural that the Negro, who has suffered much in American life, would be further frustrated by the World War and would read into it supernatural meaning and would be more inclined than ever before to seek peace and solace in Heaven. Nor is it contradictory to see that in the same period, from 1914 to the present, literature would be produced revealing atheism, doubt, cynicism, and bewilderment. This would naturally come after the War when the Negro had become fully aware of his disillusionment. He had been led to believe that conditions would be better for him after the War. Lynching did not cease. The Negro fared no better in the courts. Race riots broke out in various sections.

Segregation increased and conditions generally grew worse. Out of this situation came floods of Negro literature expressing a lack of faith in God never before witnessed in the history of the Negro in this country. The Negro who had been considered to be the most religious of all groups, and whose faith in God was irresistible, began to develop literature after 1920 fraught with agnosticism and atheism. "The faith of the fathers" was shaken for the first time. The other widely opposite view is not denial and it is not other-worldly. It is the development of the idea of God by that type of Negro modernist who took God out of the compensatory setting and used the idea in areas of social reconstruction. It was an effort to bring the idea of God up to date--to make God equal to the task required in social rehabilitation stimulated by the War.

4. With respect to the idea of God, there are three strands that are rather constant and tend to persist in all three types of literature.

a. There is continuous insistence upon the idea of God as being no respecter of persons; that from one blood he created all mankind. The Negro will not accept the idea of a partial God.

b. The idea seems to persist that somehow things will work out to the advantage of the Negro--our cause is just; God is just; and God is on the side of the right. This being true, the Negro cannot lose. The Negro insists upon having a God of justice and a God who is going to see to it that he wins through.

c. There is also a constant note of doubt, frustration, protest, and cynicism, especially among the younger writers and particularly among the post-War writers. There are also expressions of atheism.

5. It is tremendously revealing to note that Negro classical writers have, for the most part, adhered rather closely to the orthodox, traditional views of God. In fact, there are to be found only a few astonishing ideas of God in the whole survey. Where there has been a radical departure from orthodoxy, it has been a departure toward atheism as expressed in Humanism or in Communism. There are two other notable exceptions: In Redder Blood the idea is advanced that God gives each person a selfhood into which He himself cannot enter. Howard Thurman advances the view that God cannot be what He ought to be until every other person is what he ought to be. Orthodoxy proclaims the omnipotence of God and with Him nothing is impossible. Though adhering to orthodoxy, Negro classical writers are very discriminating in their selection and use of the traditional ideas of God. They have used, in most instances, only those ideas of God that are compatible with the needs and hopes of a suppressed group--God made of one blood all races, God is just, God is on the side of the right, God is love, God is beauty, God and humanity are one, the Negro is on errand for God--they employ the ideas of God that embody the values the Negro seeks.

6. There are strange contradictions in the views of God expressed by the same writers. Both Dunbar and Washington held views of God that are compensatory; they also held views of God that are developed along social lines. At one time

James Weldon Johnson implies that God has a plan for the Negro; at a very recent date he denies purpose in the universe except what man gives to it. DuBois is firm in the affirmation of the existence of God and the implication that He is a God of social righteousness, while he doubts God as helpful in the social struggle. He never seems to rely upon God to help right the ills of society. DuBois's non-reliance upon God in the area of social reconstruction and Washington's firm faith in God at all times may account for their opposing social philosophies. There are authors who assert that God is wholly impartial; yet they indicate that God has chosen the Negro for a unique mission on the earth.

7. The most outstanding revelation of this thesis is the fact that the Negro's idea of God grows out of his social situation. The cosmological and teleological ideas of God are conspicuous by their absence in Negro literature. Modern ideas of God such as Mathews' "God is the personality producing activity"; the identifying of God with some evolutionary process as in Bergson's "Elan Vital"; the implication that "God is the ultimate, synthetic, ordering, organizing, and regulative activity in the universe which accounts for all the structural groupings in it," as seen in Smuts's "Holism"; that "God is progressive integration or the growing good" as maintained by Wieman; the idea that "God is the struggle toward the next higher level" as represented by Alexander; the mystical approaches to God in which one is completely absorbed in the Deity; and the view of Barth that "God is wholly other" have not permeated Negro literature. The moral, traditional approach is the one the classical Negro writers have used. They have apparently been either indifferent or ignorant relative to modern expressions of God, except the variations mentioned under paragraph 4.

The data show that ideas of God are used, whether compensatory, socially constructive or abandonment, at the point of social crisis; at the point where justice is denied, hopes thwarted, and plans shattered owing in part to the hampering proscriptions imposed upon the Negro by the dominant group. His ideas of God, so to speak, are chiseled out of the very fabric of the social struggle. Virtually, all his ideas of God express the unfulfilled yearnings of the Negro group, whether this-worldly or other-worldly. The ideas of God here, as can be validated historically, developed along the line of the Negro's most urgent needs and desires.

Unlike that of many people, the Negro's doubts, frustrations, agnosticism, and atheism with reference to God do not develop as the results of the findings of modern science nor from the observation that nature is cruel and indifferent; but primarily because in the social situation he finds himself hampered and restricted. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Negro group has produced great preachers but no theologians. He is not

interested in any fine theological or philosophical discussions about God. He is interested in a God who will help him bridge the chasm that exists between the actual and the ideal. The Negro's life has been too unstable, too precarious, too uncertain, and his needs too great for him to become objective enough to theologize or philosophize about the existence or the nature of God.

